

MIETRO

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Lashing Back at Taxes



BY BIKHU KHAN — THE WASHINGTON POST

E. Ann Brunk, Wheaton
2002 Assessment: \$172,010
2005 Assessment: \$344,960
Last Year's Taxes: \$1,937

"I don't know what's happening to Montgomery County but I don't like it one bit!! I'm a 73-year-old widow and have to save all year to pay my real estate taxes. Are you trying to push the average, unrich widows and widowers out of the county? Sure looks like it!"

Outcry Rises as Levy on Montgomery Property Also Increases

By CAMERON W. BARR
Washington Post Staff Writer

The tone of Colleen Carrigan's April 12 e-mail to the Montgomery County Council went from polite to combative in a single sentence.

Requesting a list of council members who have voted to increase property tax revenue beyond limits set in the county charter, she wrote: "Please inform these members that I will actively and adamantly lobby to ensure their defeat in upcoming elections. I will cross party lines and vote Republican in order to keep from being financially exploited as a homeowner, as will many of the neighbors to whom I have spoken."

Carrigan is assembling a group called Long Branch Citizens for Homeowners' Tax Relief.

In numbers not seen in years, Montgomery residents are writing, e-mailing and stepping up to microphones to demand an end to rising property taxes. Their numbers are still limited, but they have commanded the council's attention. With varying degrees of conviction, council members are debating measures that would provide broad and targeted property-tax relief.

The council is reviewing an expansive, \$3.6 billion budget proposed by County



BY BILL O'LEARY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), and next month it must approve a spending plan and set the county's tax rates.

For decades, the premise of governance in Montgomery has been the willingness of

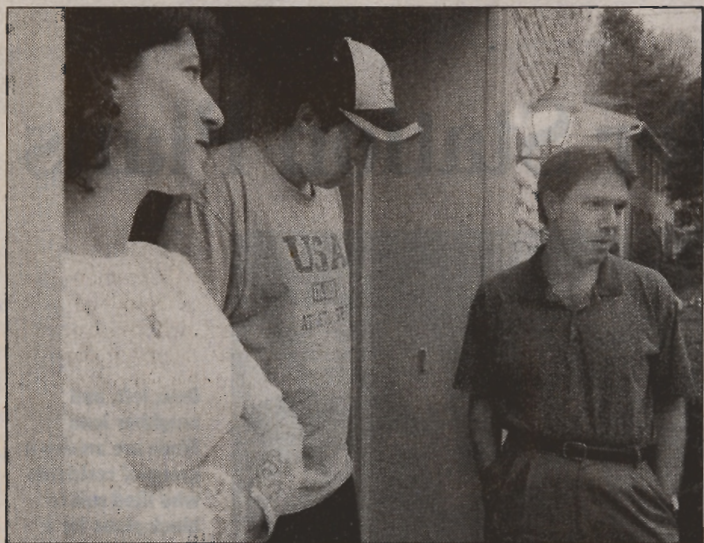
"What motivated me was disgust, because I read in the local newspapers that in some areas they had increased the assessment by more than 63 percent. And I wondered: Well, when do we see an additional 63 percent of services to the homeowners in the county?"

William B. Davis, Potomac
2002 Assessment: \$419,510
2005 Assessment: \$749,800
Last Year's Taxes: \$5,055

residents to pay high taxes in exchange for premium services, including some of the country's best public schools. The clamors

See TAX, C6, Col. 1

M A R Y L A N D



BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

"I'm from Baltimore, I'm a registered Democrat — I don't think I've ever voted for a Republican, ever. . . . I'm not like this tax rebel, okay. That's not me. I'm just a regular constituent and I realize that things go up and taxes go up, fine. But again, my point was, there have got to be limits."

Stuart Carroll (above right), Potomac

2002 Assessment:\$562,710
2005 Assessment:\$761,090
Last year's taxes:About \$6,200

As Taxes Rise, So Do Voices of Discontent

TAX, From C1

for services typically have drowned out the cries over taxes.

At an April 7 council budget hearing, about 15 people in the audience held placards that read "TAX CAP NOW." They were outnumbered at least 4-to-1 by those wearing bright-yellow stickers printed with the phrase "SUPPORT MC!" — a reference to Montgomery College, the county's publicly funded community college.

At such moments, it appears to be business as usual in the county. Tax protesters at the hearing included Robin Ficker, a longtime Republican anti-tax activist, and Marvin Weinman, the head of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League. The two activists rarely miss an opportunity to urge the council to embrace fiscal restraint.

cil "town hall" in Gaithersburg, where he pleaded with members to protect long-term residents from tax increases caused by rising real estate values.

Some council members are determined to restrain spending and revenues — notably, Andrews and Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Eastern County) — but other members seem dubious about the need to do so. These are boom times, particularly in the real estate market, and prosperity, to many politicians, means a chance to spend money on ambitious programs, not retreat to basic services. "We're in the middle of a political emergency; it's not an economic emergency," council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said.

Even so, he has introduced a bill that would allow more residents to defer the payment of property-tax increases until they

grant. This year, however, they are joined by residents who have seldom if ever contributed to the county's annual budget and tax debate. More than 60 have written the collective council since the beginning of the year — a modest number, but more than three times the communications received on taxes in 2003 and 2004 combined, not counting a flurry last year associated with a tax-rate-reduction effort by council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg).

This year's missives don't betray any signs of an organized campaign, but their collective tone has contributed to the council's retreat on spending this spring.

"Do you remember Peter Finch in 'Network'?" E. Ann Brunk, a Wheaton widow, asked in an interview, referring to the 1976 film in which a television anchorman, played by Finch, urges people to vent their rage at the sorry state of the nation. "Well, I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," said Brunk, quoting the movie.

"I'm sorry, but that's how I feel," she added.

Potomac resident Stuart Carroll, a business owner who has two sons in public school, has sent two e-mails to the council. In response to his first, council President Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) wrote to say that regardless of the percentage increase in his assessment, his property tax increase would be capped at 10 percent. "Frankly," Carroll wrote back to Perez, "taxes which increase by even 10 percent per year create an unreasonable burden on all taxpayers — not just the poor, disabled and elderly."

William B. Davis, a retired U.S. diplomat who also lives in Potomac, took his concerns to a coun-

sell their homes.

Perez is skeptical about the strength of the anti-tax sentiment: "I'm not seeing a groundswell." He noted that in last year's election, voters rejected a proposed amendment to the county charter that would have forced the council to limit increases in property-tax revenue to the rate of inflation.

As it stands, the council can exceed that limit if seven members agree; the amendment on the ballot would have eliminated that override capability. The council has voted to override the limit in each of the past three years, and would have to do so again to fund Duncan's budget.

Duncan spokesman David Weaver said the county executive hasn't seen an increase in voters complaining about rising taxes. "We think that people in the county . . . are more willing than most to pay a little more to get more," he said.

This year, Duncan, who plans to run for governor in 2006, proposed a budget that for the first time in a generation fully funds the requests of the school system, the park and planning agency, and Montgomery College. It would create 225 positions in county government; would result in new spending on the arts; and would provide affordable housing and health care for the uninsured.

Council member Steven A. Silverman (D-At Large), who is preparing to run for county executive, is surveying constituents by e-mail. He said he has received 600 to 700 responses to a questionnaire he distributed with the subject line "Tell Me What You Think."

He said he hasn't yet tabulated the responses. "If there is a property tax rebellion out there, it's going to show up in my e-mail," he said.



BY NIKKI KAHN — THE WASHINGTON POST

"I'm not going to take it anymore," E. Ann Brunk, at her Wheaton home, says of property tax increases. "I'm sorry, but that's how I feel."